

Pets, Youth Bond Through Health Department Program

Have you wrestled an alligator?

Do you get rabbits?

Have you picked up horses?

The questions Lake County Animal Care and Control Warden Renee Wright fields from a group of teenage girls are not unusual, but they just touch the surface of what the visits are about at Allendale Association.

The 100-plus acre Allendale Association campus near Lake Villa is home to boys and girls, ages 7 through 21, who have experienced emotional trauma - so much trauma that they can easily understand the feeling of being unwanted like the animals taken to the Animal Care and Control program near Mundelein. On average the youths placed in the program by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services have lived in 12 different homes before arriving at Allendale.

So for the past five years, Renee has been using the commonality between unwanted animals and the youths to provide therapy for the troubled youths.

"Animals tend to break down walls. I've seen changes in children from the start of a program to the end of program," she said.

Renee conducts education programs throughout Lake County on behalf of the Lake County Health Department's Animal Care and Control program, but Allendale is her favorite spot because the programs are not only educational, but therapeutic for the youths. During the once-a week visits over six weeks, Renee talks about animal cruelty and the youths learn they can survive being mistreated just like the animals who visit are surviving, Renee said.

She also talked about being cautious around mothers of baby animals. "Never underestimate what a mom will do for her babies," she said, after which one youth turned to her friend and softly said, "Not my mom."

There are over 1,200 youth and their families served by Allendale's programs with about 105 children living on campus in Lake Villa and attending school there, plus about 60 more youths attend day treatment school and counseling in Lake Villa.

Youths must earn the right to attend the sessions with the animals and Renee said that inevitably there is one youth in each group with a passion for caring for animals.

"It's hard to see why people don't care for their animals," said 14-year-old Shirley, who wants to be a veterinarian. "When I see a dog, I want to adopt it right away."

Renee told the group how Animal Care and Control is usually called when someone has dumped a pet and hopes that someone will find the pet and take it in. "With the economy being the way it is, people

don't know what to do with their pets when they cannot afford to care for them. They drop them somewhere out of fear of being judged."